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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA SEES SECOND GOVERNMENT AVERTED,
BUT WARY OF LAHOUD'S MYSTERY INITIATIVE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Samir Geagea received the Ambassador on July 6 in his recently completed home and Lebanese Forces office in Maarab. Other than the French initiative, the political situation is on hold, Geagea observed. The opposition is not currently working toward a second government, but President Lahoud is probably preparing another nefarious new plan, Geagea worried. Lahoud probably would not be able to justify remaining in office after his already extended and constitutionally tenuous term expires on November 24. Instead, Geagea argued, Lahoud might declare a state of emergency or attempt to dissolve the parliament in the hope that the opposition would win a greater majority in the next election. Finally, Geagea argued that there are no signs of a pending military coup, as the army is unwilling to lose its image as the one truly national institution. End Summary.

POLITICAL SITUATION
ON HOLD

2. (C) Samir and Setreda Geagea along with Lebanese Forces (LF) advisors Elie Khoury and Joseph Nehmeh welcomed the Ambassador and Econoff on July 6 to the Geagea's recently completed home and Lebanese Forces (LF) office in Maarab. (With the complex built in a severely modern brutalist style, with lots of exposed concrete, the visitor cannot help but wonder whether Geagea's extended prison experience influenced his design choices. Geagea's aesthetics, shall we say, seem to differ from those of his Hariri partners, surrounded by the "Louis Farouk" extravagant interiors of Qoreitem.) Other than the French initiative, the political situation is on hold, Geagea noted. Geagea was pessimistic about the initiative meeting scheduled for July 14-17 in Paris, noting that even the French were lowering expectations, but he commented that the initiative will do no harm. MP George Adwan and Nehmeh will represent the LF in Paris.

3. (C) The opposition seems have put formation of a second government on hold, now viewing a second government as a scare tactic, last resort, or an action to be triggered later, Geagea argued. For example, Lahoud might wait until the last 10 days of his term to appoint a second government if Speaker Berri calls a special electoral session of parliament but it fails to draw the two-third quorum defined by Berri as needed to elect a president. Lahoud does not

really have the power to form a second government, Geagea argued. The constitution does not give Lahoud the right to appoint a new prime minister on his own, and if the president's term expires without a successor designated then the powers of his office will accrue to the Siniora cabinet.

14. (C) The international community should prepare not to recognize a second government, Geagea argued. The Ambassador noted that, while mainstream countries will not recognize a second cabinet, in fact many countries -- such as UNIFIL troop-contributing countries worried about force protection issues -- will meet with the second cabinet in practice. Should the president appoint a second set of ministers, Geagea argued, then the international community could allow its lowest-level diplomats to meet with such ministers, while not publicly acknowledging the second government. Praising the USG visa ban, Geagea advocated that key international partners should reach out to Lebanese politicians to deter those who might consider participating in such a second government. These partners could emphasize the cost to Lebanese figures' international reputations of participating in such a government, Geagea reasoned, rather than having to sanction those individuals later.

...BUT LAHOUD CERTAINLY
PREPARING A NEW PLAN

15. (C) But no matter how much one works to deter a second cabinet, President Lahoud is clearly preparing some alternate plan, Geagea worried, either in parallel with or instead of the pursuit of the formation of a second government. A possible but unlikely Lahoud plan is to remain in office after his already extended and constitutionally tenuous term expires on November 24, Geagea argued. Should the GOL fail

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to elect a president before the end of Lahoud's term, March 14 will consider the office of the president vacated the minute his term expires. The cabinet will either assume the powers of the presidency or, under article 74 of the constitution, will hold an immediate parliamentary session to elect a new president. That strategy does not address the need for a two-thirds quorum for the first round of voting that the pro-Syrians will insist upon, Geagea admitted. Up to 70 percent of the population would reject a further term extension for Lahoud, Geagea reasoned, which Lebanese would view as "personally greedy." So if Lahoud tries to stay in Baabda, then perhaps the benefits of public disgust will actually accrue to March 14.

16. (C) Alternately, President Lahoud might use security problems as a pretext to declare a state of emergency, Geagea suggested, which would give the army control over the press but otherwise have little effect on the powers of the cabinet. While Geagea was vague about exactly how a state of emergency would change the powers of the army, presidency, and cabinet, he believed the cabinet would have the power to rescind the state of emergency. (Note: Lawyer and Aoun bloc MP Ghassan Moukhaiber, in a separate July 6 meeting, argued that declaring a state of emergency would only give the army control over security matters and the press. It would not suspend the constitution or substantially affect the powers of the president or the cabinet, outside of security matters. Only the cabinet has the power to declare a state of emergency, Moukheiber continued, although President Lahoud might try to take on such power in the absence of a "legitimate" cabinet. End Note.)

17. (C) Finally, Lahoud might consider dissolving the parliament in the hope that the opposition would win a greater majority in the next election, Geagea suggested. However, until parliament passes a new electoral law, any election is likely to produce very similar results -- while elections under the current law would work to the March 8-Aoun favor in Baabda-Alley, March 14 would make up for

losses there by winning seats in Zahleh. The Metn area may be up for grabs between March 8-Aoun and March 14 candidates, with the Armenian Tashnaq party (heretofore allied with Aoun) a potential swing vote.

NO SIGN OF
COUP PLANNING

18. (C) The Ambassador and Geagea, reviewing all possible options, mused about whether the increase in media and advertising praising the army suggested that Lebanon could suffer a military coup. Is there a point, the Ambassador asked, when all of the backing the army has received -- which is something quite positive in general -- becomes a danger? Shaking his head, Geagea argued that there are no signs of a pending military coup. A coup would threaten the image of the army as the one truly national institution, and thus is not even in the army interest. In addition, a coup requires weapons and ammunition, most of which the United States and other pro-government allies are currently providing. Instead, it would make sense to continue building national confidence in the army and trying to convince Commander Sleiman that he has a future with March 14 and with a legitimate government.

A TRANSITIONAL TWO-YEAR PRESIDENCY?

19. (C) The Ambassador asked Geagea about the idea circulating about a two-year presidency, as a transitional way out, to avoid a potential vacuum if presidential elections otherwise will be blocked. Geagea said that he saw a two-year presidency as a possibility, but only as a last step. It should be pursued only if all attempts to get a regular, six-year presidency fail, he said. He firmly rejected the idea that LAF Commander Michel Sleiman would be an appropriate two-year president. In Geagea's view, March 14 leaders should agree to concede on a shorter term only if March 14 was able to put its candidate in office. Maybe, he mused, a deal could be struck by which a March 14 president would agree to resign after two years, if the summer 2009 legislative elections produced a new majority. If March 14 retained his majority, then the March 14 president could complete his normal, six-year term.
FELTMAN